

## **Towards an Interactional Approach to Touch**

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Touch is a pervasive human action; it plays an important role in interpersonal relationships, in private as well as in institutional contexts. Touch constitutes a fundamental way of sensing the materiality of the world. Underlying our approach is the assumption that social interaction lies at the heart of human sociality (Enfield and Levinson 2006). The chapter focuses on the contributions of interactional studies, namely within the fields of linguistic anthropology, psychological anthropology, ethnomethodology and conversation analysis. We examine the originality of perspectives that reveal the social, intersubjective, intercorporeal, and interactional dimension of touch. We elaborate on this interactional conceptual framework by highlighting its methodological consequences, and by emphasizing the contribution of video-based multimodal studies of touch.

Our point of departure is the conceptualization of touch as a socio-cultural phenomenon deeply rooted in social interaction; we highlight studies that engage in the detailed study of touching moments within situated activities and joint courses of action. Such moments involving touch are characterized by the intersubjective sharing of what it is to be touched or to touch each other, or, in the case of touching objects, what it is to apprehend material objects together with other social actors (by, for instance, collectively exploring their properties). The chapter reviews empirical analyses of touching practices, video-recorded and occurring in different social contexts: families, schools, field schools, health care, shops, leisure and sport activities, etc. We examine the social and communicative features of corporeal engagements, conceptualizing touch as an interactional phenomenon. We propose a methodology for studying touch in a multimodal ethnomethodological, and conversation analytic perspective.

Our interactional approach to touch in social interaction is inspired by social, interactional, and phenomenological perspectives conceptualizing human action as embodied and experienced within the social and material world. This approach relies on recent scholarship emanating from a strong criticism of the dominance of language (i.e., the “linguistic turn” in social sciences). An “embodied” or “corporeal” turn, instead, strives to articulate a new vision of how language, body, cognition, and social life intersect (Clark 2008; Farnell 2012; Gallagher 2005; C. Goodwin 1981; C. Goodwin and Goodwin 2004; Gonzalez-Arnal, Jagger, and Lennon 2012; Meyer, Streeck, and Jordan 2017; Mondada 2014; 2016; Streeck, Goodwin, and LeBaron 2011; Varela, Thompson, and Rosch 1991). Paradoxically, this re-conceptualization of the human subject as embodied has so far neglected touch as a central aspect of human existence and experience. Such neglect reverberates with the long-standing Western philosophical and social science traditions that, since Aristotle’s *On the Soul* (350 B.C./2018), treated touch as primal, basic, and therefore, occupying the “lower” position in the hierarchy of the senses. Touch was considered to characterize animals and “inferior” social groups (such as children, females, and non-White people) (Claussen 2012).

In contrast to this view of touch, our chapter directs its attention to social situations where touching features as a naturally occurring part of social life; the studies reviewed examine the social meaning of touch for the participants in social interaction. Embodiment as a characteristic human condition (in contrast to the great mind-body divide) is associated with phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty's notion of *intercorporeité* (in English "intercorporeality") (Merleau-Ponty 1945/2012) as a primordial condition and engagement of sentient and sensible corporeal subjects, i.e., the basic feature of human "being-in-the-world". Intercorporeality, as argued by recent interactional conceptualizations (Meyer, Streeck, and Jordan 2017; Meyer and Wedelstaedt 2017) is not limited to the phenomenology of the individual's experiential self, but is experienced within shared social practices. Similarly, the present interactional approach to touch aligns with a micro-sociological view that human embodied conduct is anchored within the social situation and interaction order (Goffman 1983). Embodied conduct, including the use of touch, is not only normatively but also interactively ordered, interpreted, or "disciplined" (in Foucault's words, 1977). It is socially imposed and negotiated through various "techniques of the body", that is, culturally and socially specific ways of arranging the body within specific activities (such as swimming, walking, or sleeping, which are shaped by training and education (Mauss 1935). Its meaning is not only the result of disciplinary socialization, but emerges within the moment-by-moment unfolding of movements and body orientations.

The anthropology of the senses (Howes 2003) has brought attention to culture-specific, rather than universal, features that privilege specific sensuous experiences, practices, and representations that characterize a group. This includes the sensorial dimension of a diversity of cultural realms, from everyday life to religion and healing. Anthropological studies describe the "sensorium" of a cultural group both in its *Weltanschauung* – captured in its representations, cosmogonies, and beliefs – and in its specific cultural practices (see Geurts 2002 about the Anlo-Ewe in Ghana ; see Stoller 1997 about the Songhay in Niger). Nishizaka (2007) describes the multisensorial convergence of speaking, viewing, and touching entailed in interactions between midwife and client in a Japanese midwife house. Describing therapeutic practice in Yap, Throop (2012) finds that the sensory modality of touch allows for diagnosis of pain. Among Yapese healers and patients, tactility is considered a modality for embodied intersubjectivity. Other studies, like Rasmussen (2006) on Tuareg women healers, focus on activities in which touch is crucially relevant in medical practice, exploring the role of touch in offering care, diagnosis, and healing. Meyer (2017) in his anthropological study of Wolof culture in Senegal shows culturally variable organization of senses and a communicative sensorium, made possible by particular emotional landscapes and socio-spatial practices of being together. Conversations there include the bodies of the persons co-present as object "ready to hand;" touch (rather than gaze) is used to coordinate interaction, e.g., to gain attention and to select addressees (Meyer 2017, 158). Examining the "tactics of tactility" Hillewaert (2016) finds that in Coastal Kenya, the qualities of subtle push, pull, and touch in handshakes are important performative acts. These are implicated in the presentation of self, assessment of others, and the negotiation of interpersonal relations.

Hillewaert's point is that gestures constitute intentionally used semiotic techniques rather than prereflective or habituated practices.

In the social sciences, various social arenas and practices of touch have been explored with reference to Western societies. For instance, the institutional fields of medicine and health care are examined in relation to the professional use of touch, for various purposes, ranging from osteopaths' or physiotherapists' functional manipulations of the body of the patient, to empathic touch towards a suffering patient by nurses (see review by Kelly et al. 2018). In this case, the form of touch is sensitive to the construction of a particular caring and clinical relationship, within a normative space regulating touch as an accountable and normatively guided professional hand movement – rather than a private and personal one.

In these contexts, touch is often related to social asymmetries. For instance, it is more common for institutional representatives (e.g., nurses, caregivers, doctors, etc.) than for laypersons (pupils, patients) to initiate interpersonal touch. Furthermore, touch as physical contact can involve considerable physical force and as such become a corporeal act of violence and abuse. The normative interpretability of touch and physical force are clearly demonstrated by Charles Goodwin in his seminal study of professional vision during the Rodney King trial (1994), where he shows how the policemen's movements as they beat Rodney King are interpreted by their expert representatives. These complex relations between physical contact and the accountability of touch show the multifaceted dimensions of tactile intercorporeality, its potential for intimacy, as well as abuse, and the various ways in which it can be interpreted. In social political and societal views (in, for instance, Anglo-Saxon countries), touch conduct in educational settings is questioned, and in the wake of wider societal fears of bodily and sexual abuse, "no-touch policies" are advocated (and self-enforced) (Piper 2014).

The case for studying multimodally organized interactional uses of touch is established on the grounds of recent interactional studies demonstrating that touch is recurrently deployed to manage social contexts for interaction, socialization, and enskillment (Bergnéhr and Cekaite 2018; Burdelski 2010; Cekaite 2010; 2015; 2016; M. H. Goodwin 2017; M. H. Goodwin and Cekaite 2013; M. Goodwin and Cekaite 2014; M. H. Goodwin and Cekaite 2018; Meyer 2017; Mondada 2016; 2019a; 2019b; Nishizaka 2007; 2011; 2017) – concerning both interpersonal touch and the touch of material objects. Physical acts (sustained touching management of the recipient's bodily and gaze orientation) appear also to developmentally and culturally organize recipients' attention (de León 1998; Cekaite 2016; see also Meyer 2017 on adults' interactional coordination through touch in Senegal). Such touch practices are shown to be significant in socializing the other – embodied subject – into culturally relevant modes of attention, participation, and engagement as corporeal.

On the basis of video-recordings of naturally occurring social encounters, interactional studies of touch show that tactile contact between embodied social actors plays an important role in the crafting of human relations, including practices such as achieving another person's compliance, socializing children, displaying intimacy and affection, or guiding and monitoring the recipient's attention. These studies not only show that haptic encounters are structured in an

orderly way, but also that touching moments involve an interactional orientation to the recipient's bodily integrity, made publicly visible through the multimodal features of the encounters, such as the concurrent use of talk (Cekaite 2015), sequential organization, and responsivity of touching. These studies also show that the access to materiality and the environment through touch – i.e., tactile perception – is socially and intersubjectively organized (C. Goodwin 2018; Mondada 2016; 2018). Tactility is even a major link between embodied actions and sensorial practices; as demonstrated by Streeck (2009), the active engagement of the hand grasping, touching, and exploring materiality links gesture and touch in crucial ways.

Interactional studies demonstrate also that various forms of touch can be used in close and intimate affective encounters. For instance, a hug is a corporeal intertwining that is interactionally organized and multisensorial. As shown by M.H. Goodwin (M. H. Goodwin 2017; see also M. H. Goodwin and Cekaite 2018), hugs in supportive interchanges (greetings and farewells), in addition to touch, involve a close coordination with the body, talk and prosody, which, assembled together, indicate a close and intimate affective stance. Such embodied features of supportive interchanges (including holding hands, embracing, or kissing), can be interpreted as embodied public “tie signs”, i.e. expressions which make evident the nature of a relationship as a way of being “with” the other as a social unit (Goffman 1971, 194). These intercorporeal intertwining publicly embody the intensity and intimacy of social relations, both towards the recipient of physical contact, and towards the public potential observants of such touching moments (on corporeal dialogic features of soothing embraces, see Cekaite and Holm Kvist 2017).

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